

Request for Expressions of Interest

Evaluating setting choices in 16-19: continuity of exam board in GCSE resits

Opening date: 17 September 2026

Closing date for Expressions of Interest: 5pm 12 October 2026

Background and context

16-19 Setting choices

The socioeconomic attainment gap grows as learners progress through the education system, meaning that it is at its widest when they reach the 16-19 phase. The 2026 [annual report from the Education and Policy Institute \(EPI\)](#) found that the 16–19 disadvantage gap across students’ best three qualifications remained broadly stable at around 3.3–3.4 grades, reaching 3.4 grades in 2025. The 16-19 phase represents a significant opportunity to improve attainment, support progression, and strengthen young people's future life chances.

In 2023, the Department for Education (DfE) announced an additional £40 million of funding for the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) to broaden its existing work in the 16-19 sector. Our expanded remit includes all 16-19 qualifications except for apprenticeships, and to date funding has focused on GCSE resits, transitions, attendance, Ed-Tech/AI, and technical and vocational education.

The EEF seeks to commission Choices evaluations in 16-19, focusing on testing approaches and practice-decisions that settings and teachers commonly make to support teaching and improve learner outcomes. This work aligns with the EEF’s core mission to provide setting leaders and teachers with actionable and evidence-based guidance to improve outcomes, particularly for learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Commissioning aims

The EEF is funding a **Setting Choices evaluation** to examine the impact of **GCSE resit exam board continuity** on learner outcomes.

Setting Choices evaluations focus on the impact of different setting-level practices and approaches that support learner and/or teacher outcomes. These studies aim to provide settings with evidence to inform their decision-making around practices and approaches

that are not captured by manualised interventions with external training, support or delivery. Previously funded School/Setting Choices evaluations can be found [here](#).

Existing evidence and practices: GCSE resit exam board continuity

This Invitation to Tender's (ITT) focus on GCSE resit exam board continuity builds on [a report from the Education Policy Institute \(EPI\)](#) into the drivers of success in GCSE resits. The question has also been informed by further EEF scoping with college leaders and academics.

Colleges make a range of decisions to support learners with resitting their GCSEs. In England there are currently four exam boards that colleges can choose from (AQA, Cambridge OCR, Pearson/Edexcel and WJEC/Eduqas) that provide GCSE exams for both English and maths, and there is variation in the content and structure of their exams.

Qualitative findings from the [EPI report](#) suggested that resitting with the same exam board used at the original GCSE sitting could help boost student engagement and results. However, providers also noted that offering this continuity can be logistically difficult to arrange, particularly around staffing.

Although we do not know the extent of variation nationally, a survey of EEF's college network (n=90) indicated that colleges vary in whether they align exam boards across subjects for resits, 17% try to align exam boards for both Maths and English resits, 20% try to align for English resits only, and 19% try to align for Maths resits only. In addition, 23% of respondents said they do not align exam boards and 11% said they do not deliberately align but it often happens by chance.

Evaluation design

We have identified a research question that we are keen to fund, based on the insights gathered through the existing evidence and scoping activities.

We expect the research questions to be answered through a quasi-experiment design (QED), complemented by an Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE). The 'Evaluation considerations' section details some specific considerations around the impact and IPE designs.

Evaluators should make use of the [16-19 lessons learned note](#) for reflections from previous evaluations in the sector and should follow the EEF's [statistical analysis guidance](#), considerations in the [padlock guidance](#), and any other relevant EEF [guidance](#).

Research question (RQ)

Is sitting a GCSE English or maths resit with the same exam board as the initial GCSE entry or with a different exam board more effective for resit attainment outcomes among 16-19 resit learners?

Evaluation considerations

Impact evaluation design

We expect this evaluation to use a retrospective quasi-experimental design (QED), as colleges are likely to face difficulties in changing their practice in response to a randomised design. Evaluators should propose and justify a feasible design prioritising robustness and rigour, noting the [EEF's classification on the security level](#) of different QEDs.

A key challenge for a QED is selection bias: colleges that prioritise continuity with the learner's existing exam board may differ systematically from those that do not, for example in their size, resourcing, or existing approaches to resit provision. Evaluators should set out clearly how their proposed design will identify and address these potential differences.

Data on which exam board the learner sat their exam with is available in the National Pupil Database (NPD) alongside GCSE attainment data. We therefore anticipate that this evaluation may be undertaken using linked administrative data. Evaluators should consider whether distinct analytical approaches are required for November and summer resit cohorts. It is possible that teaching for November resits may be more decoupled from learners' original GCSE teaching (often a shorter refresher for learners already close to passing), whereas summer resits are more likely to involve learners requiring more substantial teaching of skills and content closely aligned with the specific exam board's specification. Evaluators should set out how their proposed methodology will account for these differences, including whether the analysis should focus on a particular resit cohort or whether separate analyses for November and summer resit cohorts are warranted.

Outcome measures

All proposed outcome measures should be well-justified and accompanied by an explanation of the underlying outcome construct, the data collection approach, and any risks concerning the quality of the measures.

The primary outcome for this evaluation should be GCSE resit attainment, as the final grade achieved. Evaluators could also consider reporting achievement of a grade 4

("standard pass") as a secondary outcome. We are keen to leverage existing administrative data for this evaluation, so while collecting GCSE marks from colleges would improve the sensitivity of the outcome measure, our preference is for GCSE grades to be used. GCSE maths and English should be considered separately as the considerations for each subject are likely to be different.

Minimum detectable effect size

Evaluators should propose a minimum detectable effect size (MDES) based on a feasible sample size, whilst noting that for QEDs the number of settings that are classified into each 'choice' may be relatively unknown at this stage.

We acknowledge that power calculations for QED evaluations may not be straight forward, given the methodological design. We encourage evaluators to justify the underlying assumptions based on the best available evidence or simulation analysis, and to include multiple power calculations under different scenarios where possible.

Subgroup analyses

In alignment with EEF's mission to break the link between family income and educational achievement, we expect the evaluation to include a subgroup analysis of disadvantaged learners. We ask evaluators to define disadvantaged learners as those who either were eligible for free school meals at any point in the six years preceding the end of Year 11 (using KS4_FSM6_P from the NPD) or who were eligible for free meals in Years 12 or 13 (using FSMeligible from the NPD for learners in school-based providers and ILL_L_FME from the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) for learners in other providers).

Differential outcomes, barriers and enablers for these learners should also be explored as part of the Implementation and Process Evaluation.

Evaluators could consider exploring differences in effects between subjects, provider type, and between exam boards. For this question, further subgroups of interest include continuity status (i.e. same vs. different exam board from the initial sitting)

Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE) design

Theory of change development will be an important part of the evaluation activities to identify the causal mechanisms for each approach and inform Impact Evaluation (IE) findings.

The IPE should be proportionate and light-touch. Its primary purpose should be to inform the impact evaluation findings by exploring factors that may not be observable in administrative or quantitative data. In particular, the IPE should also focus on

understanding how colleges make decisions about the approaches under evaluation, including their reasons for retaining or changing exam boards. It should seek to identify contextual and institutional factors that may be associated with these decisions, and which may not be fully captured in the impact evaluation, thereby providing evidence on plausible proxies for unobserved sources of selection.

The IPE may also explore practitioners' perceptions of how exam-board continuity or changes influence teaching, curriculum planning and resit provision. Where feasible and proportionate, it may also consider learners' perceptions of their learning experience. The IPE should also consider whether these factors have differential implications for disadvantaged learners, including whether differences in the range and extent of learner data available to colleges may influence decision-making or teaching.

Given its interpretive role, evaluators may propose sequencing the IPE activities to follow the Impact Evaluation analysis, so that qualitative enquiry can be targeted at explaining emerging impact findings and observed patterns.

Evaluation process

EEF Choices evaluations have some notable differences compared to standard EEF-commissioned programme evaluations. One key difference is that a delivery team will not be assigned to any of the commissioned evaluations. The evaluation teams are therefore fully responsible for recruiting participants to the study, in some EEF Choices projects there is a scoping phase, but for this project we **do not expect evaluators to include a scoping phase** as part of their proposals.

The evaluation will require EEF Grant's Committee sign off, which will occur after the evaluation team has been appointed and the two project setup meetings have been completed. Recruitment for the study may begin once the impact evaluation has been approved and after the evaluator has secured relevant ethical approval.

The expected final output from the evaluation will be a published evaluation report.

Project timeline

Choices evaluations are intended to be nimbler than evaluations of programmes. Table 1 shows the suggested timelines for the proposed project. We are open to evaluators proposing an alternative timeline appropriate for their proposed designs, taking into consideration the sector context.

Table 1. Suggested project timeline for 16-19 Setting Choices questions

Activities	Date
Research team appointed	November 2026
Set up meetings to confirm evaluation design	December 2026
Grants Committee sign-off of budget and evaluation design	4th February 2027
Evaluation activities (QED and IPE) • Apply and obtain NPD data • Data cleaning and processing • Analysis • IPE activities	February to August 2027
Analysis and write-up	September to November 2027
Report draft	December 2027
Final report for publication	May 2028

Commissioning process

Who should apply?

Research teams with experience of conducting impact and process evaluations in 16-19.

We are interested in proposals from single research teams and/or consortia with complementary expertise and where the consortium can demonstrate that they will work well together to ensure the quality and efficiency of the project. This call for proposals is open; researchers do not need to be part of EEF's panel of evaluators if they can demonstrate the required methodological expertise to conduct their proposed impact evaluation design.

We accept applications from legally constituted organisations and not from individuals. The organisation does not have to be based in England, but if not based there, we would expect you to demonstrate the partnerships and knowledge required to work with English 16-19 settings.

Research management

The EEF will oversee the day-to-day management of funded projects, and research teams will be expected to follow the [EEF's guidance for evaluators](#) where applicable.

The study may be supported by an independent Study Advisory Board (SAB), which will provide feedback and advice to the research team around the design of the study whilst

ensuring the highest standards of rigour and research quality. The SAB will also promote alignment with relevant ethical procedures and contribute to mitigating any conflicts of interest that may arise. Members of the SAB will be selected jointly by the appointed research team and the EEF.

What does a successful application look like?

The application process is divided into two separate phases, an **i) Expression of Interest (EOI) phase** and a **ii) Proposal phase**, each with their own considerations.

A successful **EOI** should:

- Provide **clear rationale** for why the specified research question matters, its relevance to settings serving disadvantaged learners, and how it fits within the existing body of research.
- Provide a **high-level overview on the preferred evaluation approach** to answering the specified research question.
- Involve a **strong team** with prior experience of evaluations in similar contexts, including conducting RCTs/QEDs (as relevant for the research question) and implementation and process evaluations, as well as excellent subject knowledge and practical expertise related to the choice being investigated. Please include full CVs of all proposed team members, highlighting relevant expertise.
- Be no more than **2,000 words long**, excluding references and CVs.

In addition to the above, a successful **proposal** will:

- Provide a more **detailed description of the approach(es)** that you are proposing to evaluate.
- Summarise any existing **evidence on the effectiveness of the approaches**. This should include a **detailed theory of change**, i.e. a description of the mechanisms through which each approach would be expected to impact on the outcomes of interest.
- Provide **detail on the proposed impact evaluation methodology**, including:
 - Describe the proposed impact evaluation approach (e.g., RCT/ matched Diff-in-Diff/ synthetic control).
 - Describe the proposed outcomes and how they might be measured.
 - Describe how their proposed design will identify and address potential selection bias, including a strong theory about what unobservable factors would be relevant, whether and how this would be accounted for in the design.
 - Provide power and sample size calculations and justifications for the assumptions.

- Examine the impact of the intervention on the subgroup of disadvantaged learners. Present power calculations for the entire sample in question and for the FSM subgroup.
- This should include principles highlighted in the EEF's [Statistical Analysis Guidance](#) (where relevant).
- Complement the impact evaluation with a proportionate **Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE)**. Describe the research approach and how the IPE will uncover different mechanisms related to the impact. We also recommend including an IPE question to understand the impact of the choice on socio-economically disadvantaged learners¹, including, for example, exploring barriers or facilitators that may be specific to these learners. Where relevant, this should include principles highlighted in the EEF's [IPE Guidance](#).
- Describe key **ethical considerations** for the research design to the extent that they are known at this stage.
- Describe the research team's approach to considering issues of **diversity and inclusion** in their research design and implementation. This could include, for example, reflections on whether some groups are expected to be more or less able to engage with or benefit from the approach, and how that can be explored through the sampling design or the IPE. It may also include reflections on the team's approach to carrying out culturally, racially and social class-sensitive fieldwork.
- Represent **good value for money**. There are no indicative budgets for these evaluations and proposals will be assessed on their value for money in relation to the proposed evaluation design. We expect these evaluations to fall outside the scope for VAT. All applications must attach a budget spreadsheet with reasonable cost categories. Our grant funding is restricted to cover activities supporting your proposed project and cannot be used to cover costs that have already been incurred. The EEF will provide a budget template at proposal stage.
- Be at most **7,000 words long**, excluding references.

Conflicts of interest

As part of EOI and proposal submissions, please declare any actual, potential, or perceived conflicts of interest related to your involvement in the design or

¹ This should cover the subgroup from the impact evaluation but may be considered more broadly in the IPE, while limiting the definition to socio-economic disadvantage.

implementation of the programme being evaluated. You should also outline steps you would take to mitigate these conflicts. Please note this is not included in the word count.

A conflict of interest means any situation in which the evaluator (or the evaluator's personnel) engages in an activity or holds an interest that could reasonably be expected to compromise, restrict, or appear to compromise the evaluator's ability to perform the evaluation fairly and independently.

This includes, but is not limited to:

- Personal or financial interests in the programme or its delivery
- Prior involvement in the design, implementation, or management of the programme
- Relationships with individuals or organisations involved in the programme
- Any other circumstance that could reasonably be perceived as affecting impartiality

What criteria will be used to award funding?

The EEF will assess applications in line with the two phases presented above. Research teams with a successful **EOI** will be invited to submit a more in-depth **Proposal**. Each respective phase will be scored by the EEF's evaluation team under the following criteria.

Phase 1 – Expression of Interest

EOIs will be assessed against the following criteria, for which an equal weighting will apply:

- The proposed team has prior research and/or subject-matter knowledge in the nominated topic area.
- The proposed team has prior research experience in the relevant sector (e.g. 16-19, early years).
- The proposed team has an excellent track record in delivering RCT/QED evaluations and implementation and process evaluations in the relevant school phase and type.
- The proposed approach to answering the research question is well defined and aligned with the outlined scope of this research project.

Table 2. EOIs and proposals scoring criteria

Scoring Criteria	
0	Totally fails to meet the requirement - information not available
1	Meets some of the requirements with limited supporting information
2	Meets some of the requirements with reasonable explanation
3	Fully meets the requirements with detailed explanation and evidence
4	Exceeds the requirements with extensive explanation and evidence

Phase 2 – Proposal

Evaluation proposals will be assessed against the following criteria, each with their respective weighting and under the same scoring scale as for EOIs (see Table 2 above for reference).

I) **Capability and relevant experience of core project team** (35%)

- **Methodological experience** - The proposed team demonstrates a strong track record of delivering similar impact evaluations, particularly those using methodologies in line with the proposed identification strategy.
- **Sector research experience** - The proposed team demonstrates experience conducting qualitative and quantitative research specifically in the educational settings relevant to this research round.
- **Subject matter expertise** - The proposed team demonstrates understanding of the evidence/existing research, context and expertise that are relevant for the 'Choices' being evaluated.
- **Definition of roles and responsibilities** - The proposal describes a clear structure of the core research team, defining roles and responsibilities that are in line with their experience and expertise as well as the specific tasks involved in the proposed evaluation activities. If external consultants are named, it is clear how they will contribute to the research activities.

II) **Methodology and approach** (40%)

- **Research objectives** - Evaluation objectives and research questions (including questions for the impact evaluation and implementation and process evaluation) are well defined, including clearly describing the population, choice definition, outcome and relevance to settings serving disadvantaged learners.
- **Impact evaluation design** - The proposed methodological approach for the impact evaluation is feasible, appropriate and well-justified. This includes detailed power calculations with specified assumptions and randomisation strategy (if applicable). The proposed methodological approach is a robust causal

approach to answering the research questions and will achieve at least a [medium security evaluation](#) (at design).

- **Outcome measures** - The proposed outcome measures are of high-quality and suitable to the aims of the study. They should be convenient to collect, affordable, minimise burden on settings, and preferably be validated by the literature.
- **Implementation and process evaluation (IPE) design** - The proposed IPE is high-quality and suitable to the aims of the study, including clear outlines of instruments, data collection methods, sampling procedures, and analysis approaches. The proposal should describe how the IPE complements and informs the impact evaluation.

III) **Approach to research governance** (10%)

- **Ethics, data protection, and equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI)** - The proposal describes the research team's approach to research ethics, to EDI, and to data protection (including but not limited to GDPR compliance, specifying legal bases for processing personal and special category data).
- **Risk assessment** - The proposal identifies key risks to the project delivery and proposes appropriate strategies to mitigate these risks (e.g., how to deal with attrition, cross contamination, and / or low survey / interview response rates).

IV) **Value for money** (15%)

- **Project costs** - The proposal is clearly costed using the provided budget template and instructions. Costs are in line with the evaluation design and relevant assumptions on costing model are provided.
- **Value for money** - There is evidence that the proposal demonstrates value for money. The proposed budget demonstrates careful management of available resources, efficiency, and effectiveness to achieve desired evaluation milestones.

The EEF Evaluation Team may follow-up with research teams that submit strong proposals to arrange a meeting and discuss proposals further before coming to a final decision.

How to apply

Interested applicants should submit their **EOI** by completing our application form [via this link](#) by 5pm on Monday 12 October 2026.

If you have any questions, please contact Erin.Minton-Branfoot@eefoundation.org.uk before 5pm on Monday 5 October 2026.

Commissioning timeline

Deadline for questions about the EOIs	5pm Monday 5 October 2026
Deadline for EOIs	5pm Monday 12 October 2026
Shortlisted applicants invited to submit full proposals	Tuesday 20 October 2026
Deadline for full proposals	5pm Tuesday 17 November 2026
Selected applicants notified	Friday 27 November 2026